DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 703 PS 015 135

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TITLE The Physical and Psychological Environment of Children in Sweden.
INSTITUTION Swedish Inst., Stockholm.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 11p.
AVAILABLE FROM The Swedish Institute, Box 7434, 103 91 Stockholm, Sweden.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Current Sweden; n323 Aug 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accident Prevention; *Children; *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Environmental Influences; Foreign Countries; Housing; Playgrounds; *Psychological Characteristics; Quality of Life; Safety; Social Attitudes; *Social Environment; Social Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article describes aspects of the environment for children in Sweden and discusses some of the measures taken or planned for improvement. The significance of the residential environment is explored, and the nature of the child care system in a country where over 80 percent of women with small children work outside the home is described. Also mentioned are existing child safety norms and new norms currently being compiled with a view to further prevention of accidents among children. Finally, an account is given of a study into the "inner environment" of children in Sweden. Findings of this study indicate that Swedish children have problems in their relationships with the adult world. It is concluded that good material conditions are not enough for favorable development and that a good inner environment is a prerequisite for being able to take proper advantage of the external environment. (RH)

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ED258703

Current Sweden

Published by
the Swedish Institute

THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT OF CHILDREN IN SWEDEN

BY KARIN GRÖNVALL

This article describes different aspects of children's environment in modern Swedish society and some of the measures which have been or are being taken to improve it. Karin Grönvall describes residential environment and its significance for a child's development, and the child care system in a country where over 80% of women with small children work outside the home. She also mentions existing child-safety norms and new ones which are currently being compiled with a view to further prevention of accidents among children. Finally she gives an account of a study into the "inner environment" of children in Sweden.

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PS 015135

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NO 323
AUGUST 1984

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The Physical and Psychological Environment of Children in Sweden

A society's most important "natural resource" is undoubtedly its children, since children will make up the next generation of adults and will guarantee the continued existence of that society. The responsible authorities should consequently commit substantial resources to ensuring that the conditions under which children grow up are as favorable as possible. In other words, things ought to be this way, but it is still not certain that they are this way. Children's environments in Sweden vary a lot, depending on what family structure they grow up in. Differences in type of housing and in the family's class status are of major significance to child development. I will come back to these differences later. To provide a brief background to the current situation of children in Sweden, I will begin with a quick look back at history.

Brief retrospective view

Viewing the situation of children in the old Swedish society through, for instance, the eyes of the national Romantic artist Carl Larsson (1853-1919) would be both naive and misleading. Carl Larsson's idyllic paintings provide us with the image of a happy childhood existence that was nothing but one long, glorious summer vacation. For the vast majority of children, reality was completely different. Severe deprivation and poverty forced children to start earning their living at an early age, often under very difficult conditions.

If we examine Sweden's past, we find that many children lived in destitution. Wars and epidemics turned a lot of them into orphans who had to support themselves by begging. Because of deprivation, starvation, cold and illness, the death rate among children was high. Unless they belonged to the upper class, those children who survived received a very strict upbringing aimed at teaching them how to work and be diligent and obedient. Both the children in rural areas and urban working class children had to contribute to their family's livelihood from a young age. This situation prevailed well into the 20th century. In the late 19th century the first legislation against child labor was passed, since by then manufacturers no longer needed cheap child labor as new machinery was put into operation.

Nowadays child labor is regulated by ordinance AFS 1980:13 on the use of minors in the labor market, issued by the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health. According to this ordinance, minors under 16 may only be employed for light work and those under 13 only for occasional work and for no more than five days at a time.

The compulsory education law of 1842 did not actually require children to attend schools, only that instruction should be made generally available. As a consequence, those children able to find work and thereby contribute to their family's livelihood received very deficient schooling. It was not until around 1900 that the mandatory education rule was reinterpreted to mean actual compulsory formal schooling. Since then, the period of compulsory schooling has been extended successively. Under the latest official curriculum for Sweden's comprehensive schools, known as Lgr 80, pupils are required to complete nine years of school, compared with the six years stipulated in 1842. Child labor no longer exists on any scale worth mentioning, infant mortality is now among the lowest in the world (6.8 per thousand live births, according to the 1984 Statistical Abstract of Sweden), and children's lives look totally different in Sweden today than they did a few generations ago.

Child care and residential environment

The majority of Sweden's adult population spend most of the day away from their own residential area, since there is virtually no coordination between housing and workplaces. On the other hand, nearly half (48%) of all children below age 7 spend their days at home with one parent. Those who have been admitted to municipal day nurseries (day care centers) comprise 23% of all children below age 7 while 15% are enrolled in family day nurseries (explained below).

The number of children per day nursery may vary a lot. There are small day nurseries housed in ordinary apartments, with about 10 children. But there are also large day nurseries with many groups and a total of up to 150 children. The most common size, however, is 40-50 children divided into a few groups. As for the number of children per group, the National Board of Health and Welfare has recommended a maximum of 15 children per group aged 3-7 and only 12 children per group if their age is 0-3 years. In groups with children aged 0-3 the Board recommends that there be two adults per five children, in groups aged 3-7 one adult per five children and in older groups one adult per six children. As for the size of day nursery facilities the Board makes no recommendations but leaves this up to the municipal governments to decide.

Aside from day nurseries there are also so-called family day nurseries, which fulfill an important task within the child care system. In a family day nursery, a child-minder takes children into her/his own home and receives a salary from the municipality for this service. The number of children may vary from one to six (including the child-minder's own children), and their ages may range from six months to 12 years. When the number is as high as six, one or more of them are school-age children who spend time in the family day nursery only before and/or after their school day.

Today's Swedish pre-schools (day nurseries and part-time groups, the latter mainly intended for children aged 4-6) have often been criticized both by staff members and parents because their activities are largely

lacking in a uniform theoretical basis and a firm structure when it comes to goals and working methods. Now, however, the National Board of Health and Welfare is working out a draft version of a central pedagogical program for the pre-school system which will contain guidelines on how to stimulate children in the pre-schools to think, feel and act independently.

Twelve percent of children aged 7-10 spend the time before and after school in leisure time centers while their parents work. In these centers they receive food, meet friends and have a chance to spend time on various hobby activities or do their homework.

Of all children with single mothers, 77% live in apartment houses and 45% of these mothers have a working week of 35 hours or more. Of children aged 7-12 with single mothers, 36% lack supervision all day, which means that to a relatively great extent these children probably have no alternative but to take care of themselves in their own housing area. This obviously means that their residential environment is important to these children and influences their development. Two-thirds of all children in Sweden live in single-family homes, while one-tenth live in apartment houses at least four stories high and one-fourth in lower apartment buildings. Comparing the number of children in built-up areas with the number in rural areas, we find that 30% live in the three largest metropolitan regions—Stockholm, Göteborg (Gothenburg) and Malmö—while 34% live in municipal districts having more than 90,000 people within a 30 km (18 miles) radius of the municipal center, and 36% live in municipal districts with fewer than 90,000 inhabitants.

In many respects, those children who live in single-family houses have a better living environment than children in high-rise apartment buildings in cities and towns. As a general tendency, they have parents with better economic resources, since as a rule it requires a higher income to live in a single-family home than in an apartment.

People with high salaries often have a good education and are thus able to let their children grow up under favorable socio-economic conditions. Single-family homes as such obviously also offer a number of advantages—more living space, access to one's own yard etc.

The living environment of children in high-rise apartment buildings, on the other hand, can be quite dreary. During the 1960s and 1970s a large volume of housing was constructed, especially apartment houses around the outskirts of Sweden's three largest cities. The aim was to eliminate the prevailing shortage of housing as quickly as possible, and the result was that new construction was concentrated in high-rise rental apartment buildings in new suburbs. The standards of these apartments were good in terms of size and furnishings, but the living environment was monotonous and uninspiring. The natural vegetation disappeared when these buildings were erected, to be replaced by parking spaces, asphalt-covered playgrounds with uninspiring fixed play equipment and an occasional skinny, newly planted tree and hedges made of thorny bushes. In these rapidly expanding dormitory suburbs those who moved in were almost exclusively young families with children. This meant that the children in the area rarely came into contact with other categories of people.

In an attempt to correct some of the mistakes made during this "housing explosion" of 15-20 years ago, the government has introduced so-called environmental improvement grants. These grants are paid to residential

areas made up of apartment buildings constructed before 1975 to improve their immediate surroundings. This may, for instance, be a matter of making the outdoor environment better for play and social activities, furnishing common recreational areas, carrying out measures to limit noise and air pollution and decorate entry halls and walls of buildings with the help of artists. One condition for the payment of such a grant is that the measures undertaken clearly improve the overall environment and that these improvements benefit all the residents of the area.

In constructing new housing during the past few years, builders and planners have applied the lessons learned from earlier mistakes. This means, for example, that they try to prevent segregation of different categories of people in separate neighborhoods by constructing multi-family buildings that each contain a wider variety of apartment types than before. The same building may thus contain large apartments for families with several children, small apartments for single and retired people and apartments adapted to the needs of the disabled.

There are also experiments in new housing construction concepts. For example, in the suburb of Upplands Väsby north of Stockholm, a new kind of five-room apartment has been constructed; each unit can be divided into two apartments, one with two rooms and a kitchenette and the other with three rooms and a kitchen. This makes it possible for teenaged children to "move out" but still live at home, a kind of gradual moving process that may feel more secure to both children and parents. Another alternative is for Grandma and Grandpa to live in the smaller apartment, thus giving the children in the family closer contact with the oldest generation.

Playgrounds

The 1981 Swedish building standards (Svensk Byggnorm, SBN 1981) contain the following regulations and recommendations regarding the areas immediately surrounding apartment houses:

> The entrance area—within 50 meters (164 ft) of the main door—should contain an open space that has plenty of sunlight and is sufficiently large and suitably designed for small children to play in and as a spot for adults to rest and relax.
>
> The play area for small children near the entrance should be 100-200 m^2 (1,075-2,150 sq ft) in size and serve a maximum of 30 family apartments. It should be located where it gets lots of sunlight between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and can be watched from the apartments. One or more sandboxes totaling 20 m^2 (over 200 sq ft) should be included, along with space for ball games, bicycling (gravel, asphalt, concrete slabs), winter games and simple climbing equipment, as well as space for children and adults to sit. In the case of areas consisting of single-family homes, the play area may be divided into two smaller units of 50-100 m^2 (538-1,075 sq ft) each.
>
> For children's games, there should be neighborhood playgrounds or play areas, each with a surface of 1,500-2,000 m^2 (16,150-21,500 sq ft) serving a maximum of 150 family apartments. This area may be gathered into one neighborhood playground or divided into smaller play facilities within a play area, all located within 150 meters (500 ft) of the entrance of an apartment house.

Within walking distance from the apartment house entrance there should be a park with play facilities and a ball field. The park should normally have an area of 2,000 m^2 (over 20,000 sq ft) and the ball field 1,000 m^2 (over 10,000 sq ft) and the distance from the residential building should be about 300 meters (about 1,000 ft).

Because the building standards state that there should be "a sufficiently large open area which is suitable for play and outdoor stays if such an open area can be prepared at a reasonable cost and without particular inconvenience" (my underline), residential builders have been given great freedom when it comes to putting in playgrounds. The playgrounds that were built in the 1960s and 1970s were also unimaginative and uninspiring. Planners did not always consider what makes a playground attractive so that children will choose to play there instead of being drawn to shopping centers, parking lots and similar places that are hardly suitable for play. In many playgrounds, the play equipment consists of fixed structures that are impossible or difficult to change—adults have, so to speak, "finished playing" by the time the children arrive at a playground. Movable play equipment is rare, and playgrounds can sometimes be windy, sunless and surrounded by inhospitable thorny bushes. By now people have become aware of these mistakes. As a result, dreary playgrounds in many places have been upgraded, sometimes with the help of the environmental improvement grants mentioned above.

In more than 40 of Sweden's 280 or so municipal districts, certain parks have municipally financed play programs supervised by trained personnel. Such programs offer children sensible and stimulating activities such as ice-skating instruction, carpentry etc. Some of these supervised park programs also have playhouses and other buildings where children have access to different types of games and play equipment, primarily for outdoor play.

Formally there are very few norms and safety requirements when it comes to play materials. Because Swedish manufacturers of play equipment not only supply the domestic market but also export their products to other parts of Europe, they have been compelled to adjust to the safety requirements prevailing in other European countries. In West Germany, for instance, strict safety requirements are applied to play equipment. As a result, play materials sold in Sweden also maintain a high safety standard.

The Swedish Standards Institution is currently devising official Swedish safety standards for play equipment. A draft version of such a document, worked out in cooperation with the play equipment committee of the Swedish Association of Producers of Educational Aids, is expected to be completed and circulated for official comments by various interested parties this fall. The proposal, based on German standards, lays down requirements regarding materials and the properties of play equipment aimed at reducing the danger of accidents, but also includes specifications on accessability, assembly and maintenance. There are, however, no regulations governing the maintenance of playground equipment; such rules would be desirable, considering that many accidents occur precisely because of play materials have become worn-out.

Child safety

As for toys, the National Board for Consumer Policies has issued guidelines and signed agreements with the toy industry to the effect that

toys used by small children may not be hazardous to them when subjected to normal use. Some toys which are not considered suitable for small children must be labeled "Not suitable for children under age 3" and be furnished with a brief explanation.

To avoid various accident hazards in the home, regulations specify that apartments built after January 1, 1974 should be equipped with stove guards, electrical outlets shielded against inserted objects and safety catches on windows. Movable objects in the home must also fulfill certain requirements. The vertical bars at the foot of babies' cribs, for example, may not be spaced more than 8.5 cm (3.4 in) apart, the sides of the crib should be at least 60 cm (23.6 in) high and the bottom of the bed—if it consists of slats—may not have a wider space than 2.5 cm (1 in) between the slats.

To ensure that children traveling in cars are as safe as possible, the Swedish Road Safety Office, the Child Council and other organizations recommend that they either sit in a child-restraining seat (for those aged 9 months to 4 years) approved by the Road Safety Office or use a seat belt and safety cushion in the back seat (children over 4 years old). For children taller than 150 cm (4 ft 11 in) and weighing more than 35 kg (77 lb), the seat belt alone is sufficient.

When children go bicycling, sledding or ice skating a helmet is recommended, and when they are in a boat or on a pier a life preserver is strongly advised. There are no binding rules on the use of these safety devices, but the recommendations have been widely heeded, especially those regarding the use of child-restraining seats and life preservers.

Big cities, rural areas, single-family homes, apartment houses

If we were to compare the conditions under which children grow up in rural areas and in big cities, we would probably find numerous differences. In a small country village, children have immediate access to recreational opportunities right outside their doors—skiing, fishing, hiking in the woods and fields, bicycling trips on rural highways with little automotive traffic, and berry and mushroom picking. In a small town there is also the security inherent in social controls, based on the fact that everybody knows each other. The disadvantages of rural life include the long distances to schools and other service institutions such as the post office, stores, the library and pharmacy. There are also fewer cultural events, and access to educational opportunities of various kinds is poorer than in cities and towns. Unemployment in rural areas also obviously influences children's lives, since it undermines the economic situation of families and often forces people to move somewhere else.

A child in a major metropolitan area usually does not have the same advantages as a rural child, but escapes the disadvantages of rural life. But this statement really does not apply to everyone, because of the differences that exist between children due to social class. The children of parents with good economic resources have access to stimulating recreational activities, such as traveling during their school vacations both within Sweden and abroad. Their parents drive them to riding and tennis lessons. They are encouraged and stimulated to do well in school, which obviously gives them better future prospects than children of parents with poorer material resources.

Privileged children in cities and towns often live in single-family homes, while the children of blue-collar and clerical workers live in apartment houses. A comparative study of children living in single-family homes and in apartment houses was carried out by Eva Lis Bjurman, an ethnologist working at the Nordic Museum (Barn och barn, Liber Läromedel, Stockholm, 1981). She found many differences between these two categories of children and stated that these differences are not due to dissimilarities between residential areas, but are more a consequence of economic and cultural differences. Working-class children in apartment house areas spend most of their time in the suburb where they live. They often play together in large groups and perpetuate their own children's culture in the form of team games and nursery rhymes. Children of middle-class parents living in areas of single-family houses, in contrast, mostly play in twos. Their play is often interrupted by a tightly scheduled weekly program of fixed recreational activities two or three times a week, and they are more mobile than working-class children, both as a result of their recreational activities and their parents' greater opportunities for travel and outings. Bjurman also found that this social segregation is clearly reflected in school marks: the average marks at schools in areas of single-family homes are higher than in areas of apartment buildings.

Children's psychological environment

Children in Sweden today need not starve, freeze, support themselves, or go without elementary schooling or medical care. They are materially well provided for in the welfare state, but what about their "inner" lives, their minds? Despite their external prosperity, even in Sweden there are children who fare badly.

A study of 11-year-old children in five countries—Spain, Algeria, Israel, Ethiopia and Sweden—has tried to compare their living conditions (Kälvesten, A-L. and Ödman, M., Barn i 5 länder tecknar och tänker, Liber/Utbildningsförlaget, Stockholm, 1979). It is worth noting this study's finding that Swedish children differ from the others when it comes to the importance of their family to them. One statement that the children were asked to reply to was "I feel there is someone who likes me." They could answer "often", "sometimes" or "never". Of the Swedish children, 11% answered "never", whereas in the other countries hardly any children chose that alternative. Only 22% of the Swedish children answered "often"—compared with 65-70% in the other countries.

In the study, children in the five countries were asked to draw a person of either sex and write on the back of the paper what that person was thinking. They were also asked to answer a number of questions related to their attitudes. Aside from the above-mentioned difference between children in Sweden and in the other countries, other differences also emerged. Unlike children in other countries, the Swedish 11-year-olds never mentioned worries about their livelihood or responsibility for chores at home. Their drawings always showed children of their own age, who usually were thinking about recreational activities, while it was not uncommon for the children in the other countries to depict adults, whose thoughts revealed that the children were pondering their future role as parents and family breadwinners.

In Sweden, children are allowed to be children full-time. They live in a carefree children's and teenagers' world, which Kälvesten and Ödman interpret as a sign of prosperity. At the same time, they regard it as

a limited environment for children to grow up in, filled with "age-appropriate" consumption and not much else. There were clear signs that some children did not feel good about their life situation. The fact that children in Sweden, unlike their contemporaries in other countries, often liked an animal better than any human-being indicates shortcomings in their relationships with the adult world. An additional sign that Swedish children felt a lack of contact was that a common cause of fear among them was the possibility of being left alone or outside the group.

The fact that children live under good material conditions is not enough for favorable development—a good "inner environment" is a necessary prerequisite to be able to take proper advantage of the external environment.

What is being done to improve the environment of children in Sweden?

Efforts to improve the living environment of children must, of necessity, affect society as a whole. Children live in the same society as adults. When parents feel bad for various reasons—physical or psychological—their children start off at a disadvantage in terms of favorable development. For these reasons, society as whole must be included in any reforms aimed at achieving far-reaching improvements in the living conditions of children.

In Sweden, a separate government agency has been established whose task is to "work toward improvements in children's environment, with special emphasis on their play environment, and toward greater safety for children and young people." This agency, the Child Council, was established in 1980 and has subsequently worked actively to call attention to the situation of children in Swedish society by disseminating knowledge on how various factors in the physical and psychological environment prevent or stimulate children's development. The Council initiates measures aimed at preventive efforts in the field of child safety and in other ways emphasizes the importance of a good childhood environment to human development.

The Child Council runs a large-scale advisory program which includes the publication of posters, brochures and booklets on how to make the physical environment of children safer. The program also includes exhibitions, slide shows etc., which give more concrete form to the Council's ideas when it comes to children's living environment, play and play materials, children's culture and children in pre-schools, leisure-time centers and the schools. It sponsors conferences and is also internationally active in various contexts. An important part of the work of the Child Council is its direct contact with the public by means of letters, telephone calls and study trips.

A basic prerequisite for improving the living conditions of children is to make individuals as well as the responsible government authorities better aware of the existing problems and make them realize the importance of action. To sum up, a lot remains to be done before it can be said that all children in Sweden are growing up in an environment which best favors their development into perceptive and responsible adults.

Translation: Victor Kayfetz

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